



# The Courier

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**CAMÕES**  
and the Portuguese voyages  
of discovery





# LUÍS DE CAMÕES

BY VASCO GRAÇA MOURA

*The eventful life and times of Portugal's great epic poet*



Possibly the most faithful of the few surviving portraits of Camões is this copy of a work, now lost, by his contemporary Fernão Gomes.

THE little that is known about the life of Luís de Camões can be summed up in a few lines. He was probably born in Lisbon in 1525, but even this is not known for certain. Nothing is known about what he studied or where (possibly in Coimbra) and next to nothing about his life until he set sail for the Orient, where he spent seventeen equally obscure years. A few biographical hints can be gleaned from his writings. It seems, for example, that he had a rather hectic love-life, and it was perhaps because of his way of life that he was banished from the court as a young man. He is known to have served as a soldier

in Ceuta, Morocco, around 1547-1548 and to have lost his right eye there.

In 1552, he spent several months in prison in Lisbon for taking part in a brawl and after his release in the spring of 1553 embarked for India on three years' service, as was the rule at the time. While in India, he took part in a number of military expeditions. Sometime between 1556 and 1558, he set out for the Far East, perhaps as a junior official responsible for taking care of the effects of people who died on the voyage. It is not known with certainty whether it was on the outward or return voyage that he was shipwrecked in the Mekong estuary,

swimming ashore carrying nothing but his manuscript.

When he returned to Goa, he was again thrown into prison. After his release he lived on the island of Mozambique between 1567 and 1569, returning to Portugal in 1570 in a state of dire poverty. By then, however, the text of his epic poem was virtually ready for publication.

He published *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusíads*) in Lisbon in 1572, and then two short poems in 1576. In 1572, the king granted him a small pension, but Camões later had to submit a claim for arrears of payment.

Nothing more is known about his life in Portugal after 1570. He appears to have been the butt of epigrams composed by authors who were in favour at court, which may suggest that he was envied either on account of the stature of his work or because of his pension. He may then have gone through a mystical, "penitential" phase if, as is supposed, his magnificent verse commentary on Psalm 137 ("By the waters of Babylon") was written after *The Lusíads*. In 1574, a short but enthusiastic critique of his work was published, in which the author, Pero de Magalhães Gândavo, wrote: "Look at the work of our celebrated poet Luís de Camões, whose fame will outlast time."

We know neither the precise date of his death (sometime between 1579 and 1580) nor the location of his tomb in the Santa Ana church, which was destroyed in the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Not a single manuscript in his own hand has survived, and even the portraits of him are disputed.

In the sixteenth century, *The Lusíads* was twice translated into Spanish, and there appeared a collection of his unpublished writings, editions of his lyric poetry (1595 and 1598) and two more editions of *The Lusíads*, one (severely mutilated) in 1584 and the other in 1597. From then on a strong and still continuing interest began to be taken in Camões' life and work and attempts began to be made to decipher the mysteries in which they were veiled.

Camões lived during the last phase of Portuguese expansion, at a time when his country was on the verge of decline and



Frontispiece and opening page of the first edition of *The Lusíads* published at Lisbon in 1572. The work is now in the National Library, Lisbon.

political collapse. His death one or two years after the defeat of Alcazarquivir (1578) more or less coincided with Portugal's loss of independence to Spain, a situation which was to last until 1640. Yet, at the same time, Camões lived through a period of intellectual activity which has a remarkable place in the social, cultural, economic and political history of Portugal, Europe, and the world.

The values enshrined in the classical humanism of the Renaissance, which began to spread through Europe from Italy at the end of the fifteenth century, came to be blended with echoes from the teachings of the Dutch humanist Erasmus and with the multifarious debates and conflicts sparked off by the Reformation and by the growing theoretical and practical consolidation of centralized power. The geographical discoveries brought in their wake a mass of new information about the extent and true appearance of the world. They led to encounters with many other peoples, and brought into contact a profusion of different cultures and civilizations. Much-coveted produce and new sources of wealth arrived daily in the ports of Europe. The secrets of the planet were gradually being discovered. The circulation of printed information was increasing.

These upheavals brought with them a growing sense of unease which was reflected in the arts by a transition from classicism to mannerism, in politics by increasingly authoritarian forms of government, and in civil and intellectual life by

ensorship, the repression exercised by the Inquisition, the concealment of unorthodox thinking, and fear. But they also led to rapid changes in customs, attitudes and social structures, greed, the discovery of new ways of making easy money, changes in patterns of consumption, and the depopulation of inland areas due to the attraction exercised by commercial life in the capital and overseas.

Science in turn began to concern itself with the quantifiable aspects of the world and with the criticism of empiri-

cal data, while emphasis was placed on experience and new ideas which would prove the Ancients wrong.

## An age of ferment

The voyages of discovery opened up new and often contradictory ways of thinking, and new and sometimes startling horizons beckoned to those with a taste for adventure and enterprise, will-power and daring, speculation and wealth, travel and danger, freedom of action and fatalism. The times incited men to live dramatic lives in an age in which the most clear-sighted of them saw the Portuguese venture as a form of European expansion whose common denominator was the propagation of the Christian faith, even though, like Camões, they criticized the divisions among the Christians and claimed for Portugal the role of prime agent of Catholicism outside Europe. Camões was undeniably the poet of a system of values proper to the European culture and civilization of his age.

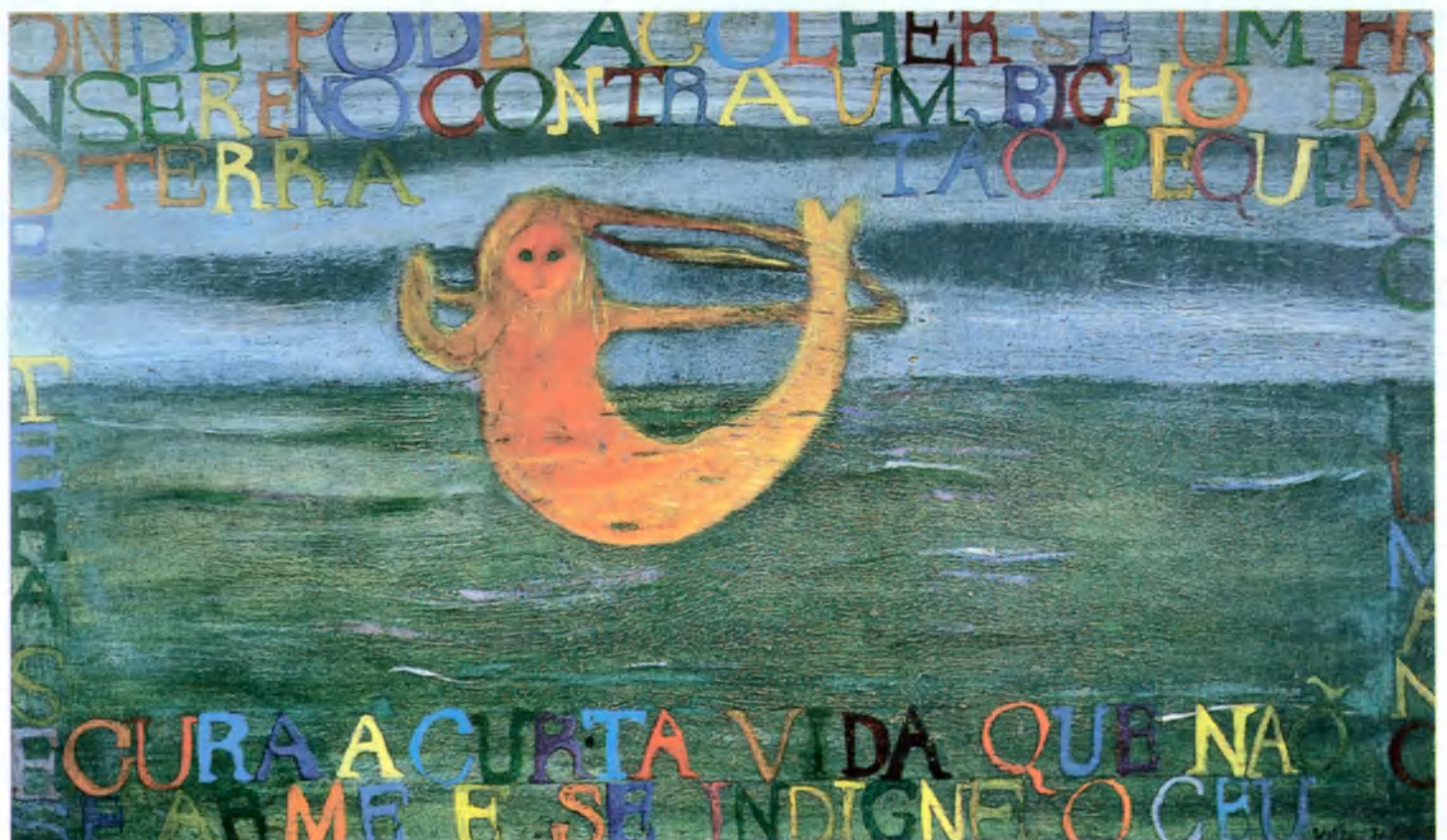
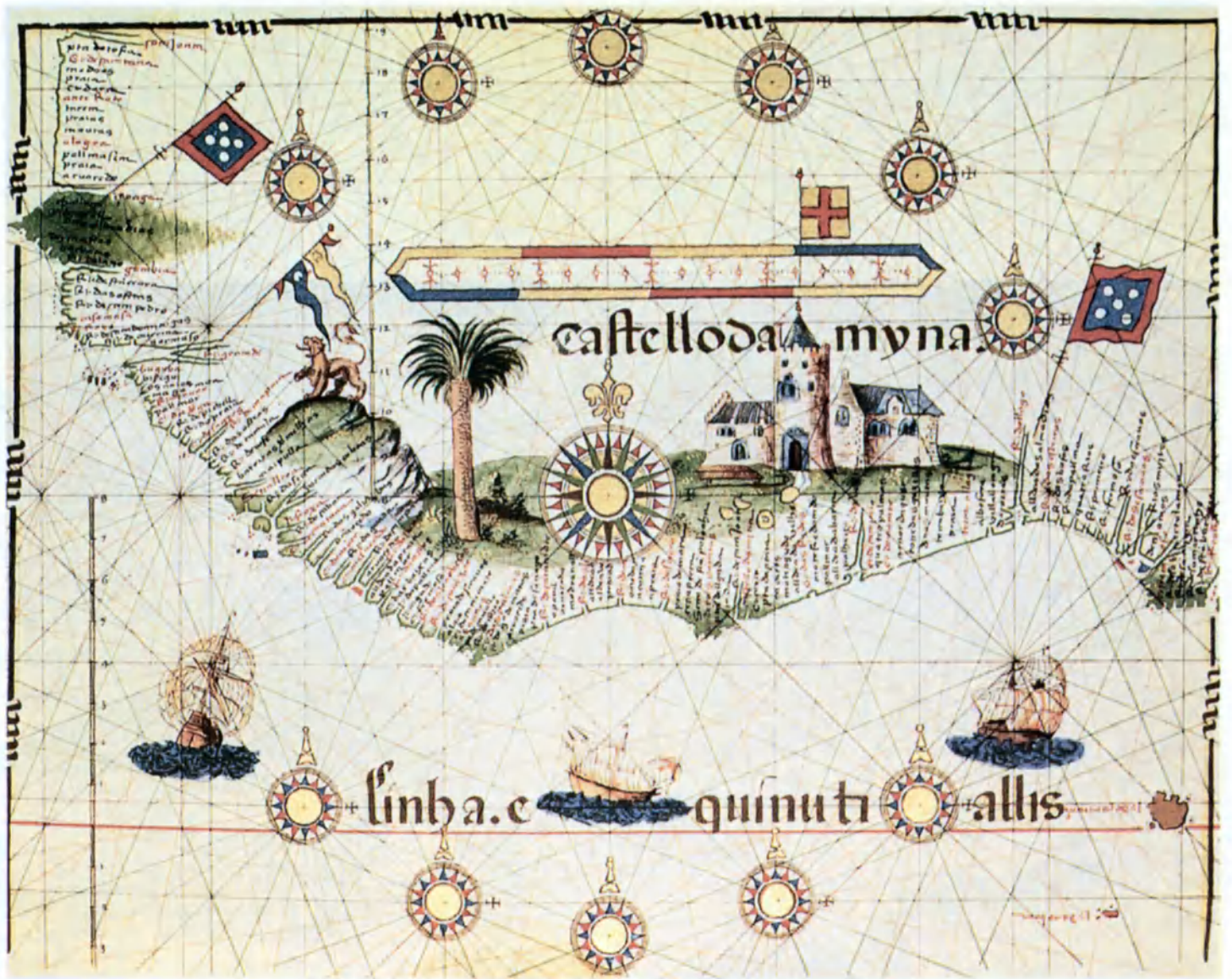
The dominant ideology took full measure of the universal impact of the Portuguese discoveries, compared them and found them superior to the legendary exploits of the heroes of classical Antiquity, and wished to hear them celebrated in the classical form of the epic poem.

The voyage of Bartolomeu Dias round

This depiction of Lisbon in the 16th century appeared in a great atlas, *Civitates orbis terrarum* ("Cities of the World", 1577), published by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg.

















Tabula hec Regionis magni brasilijs est: ad partem occidentales  
 iunctas castelle regis obtinet. Gens uero eius ingreſcentis coloris.  
 fera: & immanissima caribus humanis uelutur. Hec eadem gens aru  
 & sagittis egreſſe uult. hic phytaci ueris uires alieq; unumere a  
 nes fereq; monſtruose: et ſcymnarum plura genera reperiuntur plu  
 rimaq; arbor nalcitur que brasili nuncupata uelutis purpureo colo  
 re tingendis opportuna cenſetur.





the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, four years before that of Columbus, revolutionized geographical concepts and marked the threshold of a new era. Ten years later, the voyage of Vasco da Gama made an even more radical contribution to the transformation of European civilization and world history. In the ensuing decades there were many other Portuguese voyages of major importance. But there was no creative work of art to extol the feats responsible for these sweeping changes.

## A poet of his time

It was against this background that Camões lived and wrote his epic and lyrical work, in which so many contradictory elements coexist: tradition and innovation; Platonism and Aristotelianism; erudition and raw experience; mythology and Christianity; piety and cruelty; feudal nostalgia and the concept of the modern state; a sense of order and

disorder; joy and anguish; the Renaissance and Mannerism. In Camões, there is a tension between the concept of man as a "mean creature of clay" and the grandeur of his accomplishments on a global scale, between the frail microcosm who can overcome obstacles when aided by heaven or by valour and daring, and all the harm that can befall him if he becomes the mere plaything of the occult forces of Nature, fortune or destiny.

*At sea by such rough storms and griefs  
forespent!  
So many a moment when Death stands  
alert!*

*Ashore such strife and treacherous intent,  
Where horrible necessity can hurt!  
How can weak man escape the harsh event,  
And how misfortune from brief life avert,  
Where calm Skies range not nor take arms  
always*

*Against so mean a creature of the clay?*  
*The Lusíads, \* I, 106*

However, a similar tension also exists between Camões' national pride and his harsh and biting criticism of the very human reality whose praises he is singing:

*Alas! my Muse, alas! because my lyre  
Is wholly out of tune and my voice hoarse,  
Not from my song, but knowing I must*

*quiere  
Always for a people who are deaf and coarse.  
The favour which sets genius all on fire  
My land grants not to song, but runs  
perforce*

*After its envious lusts and brutishness,  
Sunken in harsh, depraved, and gross  
distress.*

*The Lusíads, X, 145*

These antagonistic ideas are repeated again and again throughout the complex structure of a poem in which the symbolic linking of different levels of meaning represents a striking and innovative feat of literary "engineering".

Thus Camões' account of the Portuguese discoveries is based on the unique relationship which he established between the tradition of classical Graeco-Roman culture as it was expressed in the

Clockwise from top: Frontispiece of a Spanish version of *The Lusíads* published in 1580 and the earliest editions in English (1655), Italian (1658), French (1735) and Dutch (1777).

## COLOUR PAGES

### Page 19

Above: The sea's eternal mystery, a constant source of attraction to the Portuguese, suffuses this painting entitled *The Siren* by Portuguese artist Vieira da Silva (b. 1908). The mermaid is curved like a caravel, a type of ship much-used on the voyages of discovery, and is surrounded by lines from Camões' poem *The Lusíads*.

Below: In 1482 King João II of Portugal ordered the construction of Elmina Castle (on what is now the coast of Ghana) in an attempt to preserve a monopoly in the gold trade. The fortress is shown on this map produced by the cartographer João Freire in 1546.

### Centre double page

The work of an anonymous cartographer, the Alberto Cantino map (1502) is world famous as the oldest known Portuguese planisphere. Mediterranean Europe and Africa are depicted, together with regions of the East and the Far East. In the west, the Spanish possessions of central America are framed by Newfoundland to the north and parts of Brazil to the south.

### Page 22

Detail from a map of Brazil by Lopo Homem-Reinéis, which shows *Teira Brasilis* for the first time with a certain unity. Indians and specimens of the local flora and fauna adorn the map, which forms part of the *Miller Atlas*, one of the finest treasures in the history of cartography.





literary forms imported from Italy and the renewal of the literary language, and the historical events of his time, especially the information accumulated about the great ocean voyages.

Camões made use of the epic form in a new way, so that actual geographical regions and mythical regions, real or contemporary time and mythical or absolute time, historical events and cosmic destiny, were all welded together and “contaminated” one another. Even the hero, who, in the grand tradition of the classical epic, personifies an entire people, is here not so much Vasco da Gama alone as a host of figures represented by the “illustrious Lusitanian breast, to which Neptune and Mars bowed down in obedience”. With those figures are connected a series of events, facts, individual and collective deeds indissociable from the course of Portuguese history.

Camões witnessed the world-shaking events of his time with classical eyes in both life and literature, blending the magic of paganism with the tenets of the Christian faith and indeed—in a daring and brilliant stroke—transporting the mainsprings of his plot to the plane of action of the pagan gods who symbolized the forces of Nature, some favourable and some hostile to the Portuguese venture.

At the same time, however, he witnessed the planetary revolution of his time with a modern outlook that enabled him to reject earlier models and to strike a new balance between what his genius could extract from them and what the age required him to introduce and treat in an original and concrete manner. His aim was to set the literal truth of recent historical events and exploits against the legen-

dary character of the ancient epics and, in so doing, to underscore the role which the Portuguese had played in the discovery of the world (“... and if there are other worlds, they will reach them ...”).

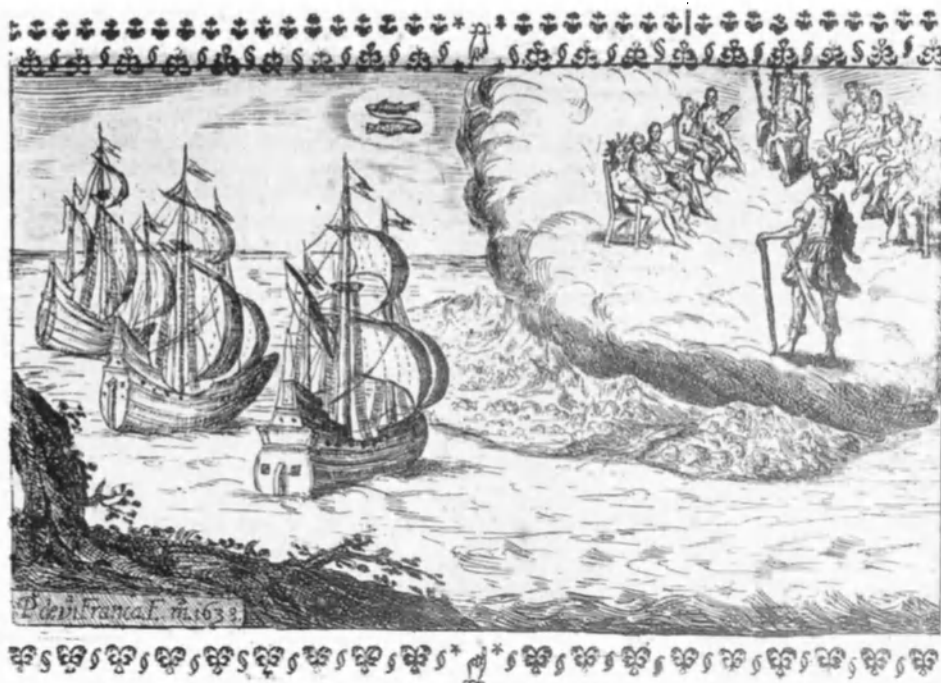
He clearly saw the revolution of his time in terms of the then geocentric view of the structure of the universe, and this enabled him to construct one of the most moving episodes in the poem, that in

which Vasco da Gama’s sailors are welcomed to the Island of Love by the goddess Thetis and the navigator is allowed to cast his eyes on the “universal machine” and to know the future in a cosmogonic vision which is the culminating point of the apotheosis of love and glory, rewards reserved for heroes:

*This universal vast machine you see,  
Ethereal, elemental, He could found  
By deep, high wisdom of infinity,  
Who no beginning has, or mete or bound.  
He, in His circle set eternally,  
The whole sphere’s well-smoothed surface,  
hedging round,  
Is God, Whose nature none can comprehend  
For human wit cannot so far extend.*  
*The Lusíads, X, 80*



Two illustrations from an edition of *The Lusíads* published at Madrid in 1639. Above, portrait of Vasco da Gama, the hero of Camões’ epic. Below, the gods meet in council, an episode from the poem.



### *An encyclopaedic work*

Since Camões was singing of real things rather than of “vain and fantastic exploits that are false and deceitful”, he attached the highest importance to historical narratives and authentic eyewitness accounts of voyages by Vasco da Gama and other navigators, to details of navigation, technology, the calendar, wind systems, climates, natural phenomena, peoples and their customs, and to the accuracy of other aspects of Portuguese history.

Thus, apart from its inestimable literary and aesthetic merits, *The Lusíads* is a kind of encyclopaedia or compendium of much of the theoretical and practical knowledge available in its author’s lifetime. It contains information on history and geography, anthropology, technology and science—ranging from flora and fauna to astronomy—and especially on the data gathered as a result of the ocean voyages and discoveries. Even when he refers to such natural phenomena as waterspouts and St. Elmo’s fire, it can be assumed that he does so because they were recorded by João de Castro (1500-1548), a Portuguese naval officer who made important contributions to the science of navigation.

Almost every time he describes peoples, landscape, geography, the exotic features of Africa or the Orient, or incidents during Vasco da Gama’s voyage, he bases his account on a chronicle, travelogue or some other document in an attempt to achieve strict accuracy combined with the mythological transpositions mentioned above.

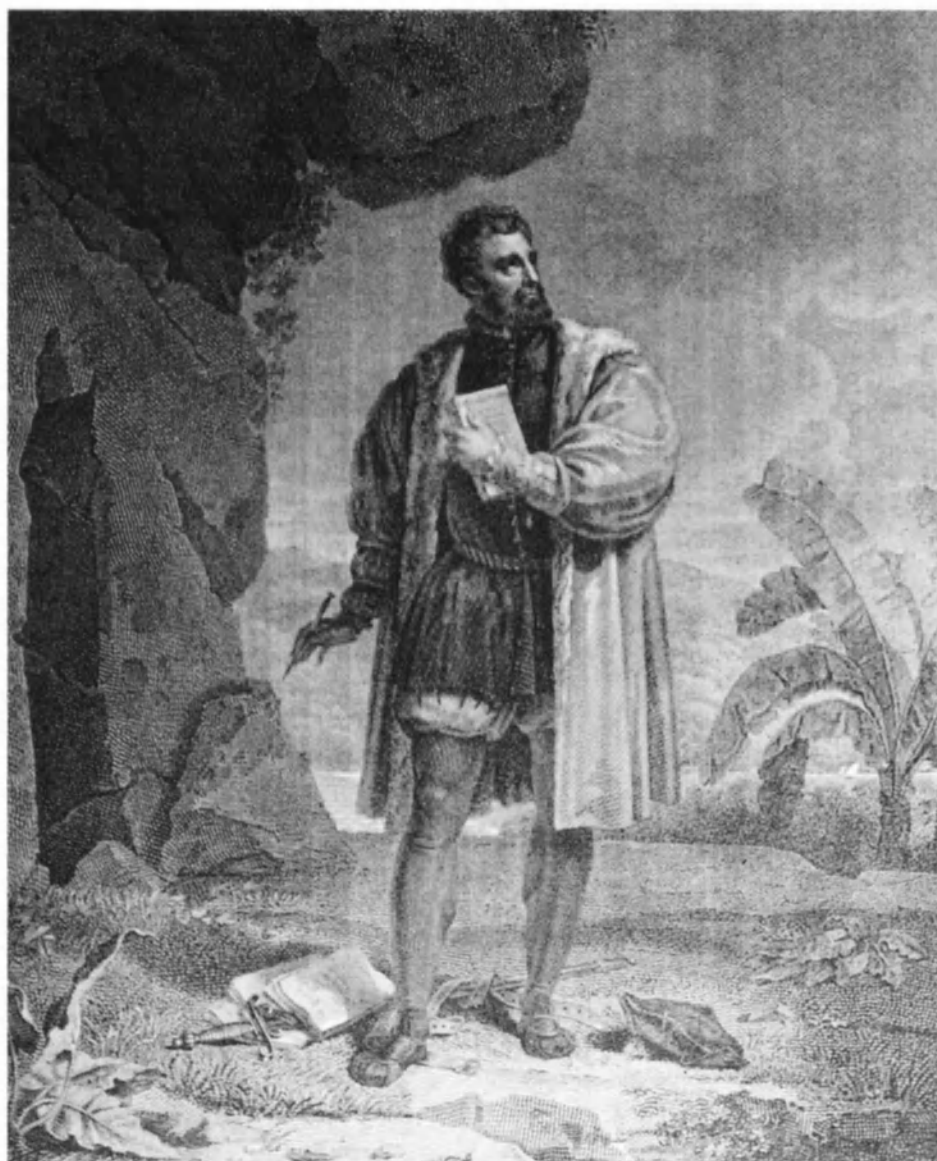






# *The Lusiads* FROM NATIONAL EPIC TO UNIVERSAL MYTH

BY EDUARDO LOURENÇO



Imaginary portrait of Camões is taken from a French edition of *The Lusiads* published in Paris in 1817 with illustrations by European artists.

THE Western maritime discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which Portugal played a leading role, were the culmination of an odyssey which had begun in ancient times. They extended the bounds of the adventure embarked on long before by the Phoenicians and the Greeks to all the seas of the world. The cycle of modern discoveries was symbolically closed in 1520 by Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese navigator who sailed for the King of Spain. After him there began an era of methodical, scientific exploration of what the twentieth-century poet Fernando

Pessoa called the “endless sea”, the *mare nostrum* of the Romans enlarged to global dimensions.

If this image exaggerates the real maritime area traversed by the navigators of Portugal, Italy, Spain and other European nations between the beginning of the fifteenth century and Magellan’s voyage, it epitomizes the difference between the voyages of the Ancients and those of the modern era. In the first decade of the sixteenth century, Westerners acquired firm evidence that the Earth is round, and knew from “knowledge which owes everything to experience”—to quote a

line of *The Lusiads*—of a sea that extended from Europe to Japan and from Greenland to Tierra del Fuego.

This knowledge was acquired the hard way, after more than a century of sporadic but methodical exploration whose modest beginnings led to the reconnaissance of the south Atlantic and the entire west coast of Africa. Underlying this exploration was the dream of sailing round a continent which was still little known to Europeans, in order to reach the Indies. The most amazing feature of this enterprise was that it should have been pursued for so long by a single country, Portugal, which often employed foreigners (Genoese, Catalans, even Castilians) in its service, while other, much richer and more powerful nations, which also possessed a maritime tradition, made no attempt to follow suit. The main reason for this was that most of the Portuguese voyages were not private undertakings like those of the great Genoese, Catalan and Venetian shipowners of the same period, or of the later French and English navigators, but a kind of state enterprise, even though their initiator was a prince, Henry the Navigator, and not the king.

The Portuguese maritime adventure was modern both in its means and in its results, but paradoxically it was “medieval” in character. By this we mean that it was simultaneously technical, mercantile and religious in character. When Camões wrote his epic a century and a half after the beginnings of maritime exploration, in a context that was already fully modern, this medievalism still dominated his vision of the world.

The aim pursued by the Portuguese navigators was tantamount to a crusade. The Christian cross emblazoned on the sails of their caravels was more than merely symbolic. At that period, from a really “modern”, bourgeois standpoint like that of the Genoese or the Venetians, such an emblem would have been seen as an obstacle to communication with peoples of other cultures and religions. But the Portuguese voyages of exploration in the fifteenth century were undertaken on the initiative of an institution that was both religious and military, not to say militant. Later the enterprise became “royal” and therefore more “secular”—if such a word had any meaning in the Por-



tugal of that time. But the religious aspect of the discoveries was always present. This is what made them an extremely complex episode in the history of Western culture.

No one understood this complexity better than Camões. He celebrated the discoveries both as an extraordinary adventure of the human spirit, a fantastic acceleration in our knowledge of the universe and its mysteries—in other words, a challenge assumed by men against the gods—and as a crusade by Christian man, bearer of a faith that had recently been assaulted in other parts of Europe.

A unique poem in European as well as Portuguese culture, *The Lusiads* has always provoked perplexity as well as admiration among figures as various as Cervantes and Ezra Pound. It was written at a turning point in history. Its context is the end of the Renaissance—a twilight era full of energy and sensuality—but also the dawn of the baroque age, with its ambiguous interplay between day and night. Camões combines glorification of the daring modernity of his countrymen's maritime exploits with a fascination for ancient cultural models. Yet this attraction is far from passive. Indeed, it contains an element of challenge. Literally and figuratively, *The Lusiads* stands at a crossroads in history when the West, and especially the Iberian peninsula, was hesitating between exposure to a new historical situation, of which the discoveries were themselves the signal, and withdrawal into ethical and religious certainties which had been shaken by the material and conceptual upheavals of the Renaissance.

Camões emphasizes above all the chivalrous aspects of the Portuguese discoveries. But this chivalry, unlike that evoked by the Italian poet Ariosto (1472-1533), is realistic rather than dream-like. He rejects the moral disorder which conquering expansion brought in its wake—the unbridled ambition, the corruption, the abuse of power, whose devastating effects he saw for himself in the East.

Above all—and this is where the poem elevates a national epic to the dignity of a universal myth—he was not content to transpose the Portuguese voyages into a heroic episode in the history of planetary discovery. He transmuted them into a kind of noble hymn to Eros, a naturalistic but also neo-Platonic version of the great Italian poet Petrarch's "Triumph of Universal Love", in which the Portuguese in a sense play the role of Argonauts. Petrarch's celebrated theme, still an



abstract vision, becomes in the hands of Camões fully dionysiac, a link and a place of harmony not only between Heaven and Earth but between humanity hitherto divided by space, race and prejudice. All Nature participates in the feast which crowns the exploits of Vasco da Gama's sailors. In the "Island of Love" episode, what begins as a hymn of national rejoicing becomes an epic of love, in which spirit and senses mingle. The heroic adventure, man's struggle with hostile elements, ends allegorically on this island, a dream of paradise where the force and violence of war assume the colours of love, and love assumes the

colours of a new alliance between peoples.

Of course, the poem is marked by certain Western prejudices. It belongs to an era in which religious militancy was particularly fierce since Westerners felt that their faith was threatened. Despite this inevitable eurocentrism, and thanks to its universalist impulse, its ethical force, and its treatment of the whole range of human physical and spiritual experience, *The Lusiads* is far from being a mere eulogy of the Portuguese discoveries as an episode in the history of a people. Even more than a great hymn to a glorious moment in the destiny of Portugal, it is the epic of the European movement to new shores, to infinite possibilities in space and time. ■

**EDUARDO LOURENÇO**, Portuguese essayist and literary critic, won the Prix Européen de l'Essai, awarded by the Charles Veillon Foundation of Lausanne, in 1988. He has taught in several European universities and from 1965 to 1988 was professor of literature at the University of Nice, France. His published works include a number of studies on the poet Fernando Pessoa.

Above, an illustration from the 1817 French edition of *The Lusiads*. It shows a scene described towards the end of the poem, the arrival of Vasco da Gama and his men on the "Island of Love". Below, a scene from the film *A Ilha dos Amores* (1982) by the Portuguese director Paulo Rocha which was inspired by the same episode.





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The Portuguese maritime expeditions exacted a heavy toll in human lives. This illustration from the Codex Lisuarte de Abreu (1558) shows a Portuguese shipwreck in the Indian Ocean (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York).



